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The Officer Selection in the Belgian Armed Forces

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Summary

In this paper we will discuss the Belgian Armed Forces Officer Selection System (BAF). First of all we will put the Belgian Armed Forces Selection System in perspective by giving some basic information concerning the levels of selection and the numbers of candidates tested. We will give a brief description of the basic selection procedure and of the different possibilities to become an officer. Furthermore the general purpose of the selection system is discussed. Then we will go through the officer selection profile that the Armed Forces are looking for. Briefly there is an overview of the non-psychological techniques and we will look in more detail to the psychological selection procedures. At the end, some closing observations are given.

Levels of selection

The BAF are composed of soldiers, Non-commissioned Officers (NCO's), and Commanding Officers (CO's). Therefore selection procedures are conceived at these three levels. Fig. 1 gives an overview of the numbers of applicants in relation to the number of vacancies. These applicants attended the selection sessions in 1997 organised by the Centre for Recruitment and Selection (CRS). Every year approximately the same number of candidates does visit the CRS.

As there is a Dutch speaking and a French speaking part in Belgium, the CRS has to create selection procedures in both official languages. This, of course, complicates the conception and execution of the selection.

In this paper we will concentrate upon the selection procedure for CO. The same procedure applies for both language systems.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Number of Applicants</i>	<i>Vacancies</i>
Soldiers	5000	700
NCO	1850	200
CO	700	130

Figure 1. Number of applicants

We will now give a description of the domains of the selection system used for candidate officers.

Domains of selection

Basically, the normal selection procedure is composed of an administrative, a physical, a medical, a psychological and an academic part. The candidate can

be rejected if he scores underneath a certain critical score for certain tests. The physical, medical and psychological part, as a whole, takes three days to perform.

The most important elements of the selection are the traditional examinations (mathematics and languages) organised by the Royal Military Academy (RMA). These examinations also take two or three days.

In addition to the basic procedure, applicants for special functions have to perform some supplementary or different tests. An overview of special functions can be consulted in Fig 2.

<i>Special Function</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
Pilot, Navy	Medical, Physical, Intellectual
Special Recruitment	Academic qualifications
Industrial Engineers	Interview, Mathematics
Short Term Officers	Limited Career
Auxiliary Officers (Pilots)	Scientific and Maths exams
Complementary Recruitment	Limited Career
Social Promotion	NCO can become CO
Federal Police	Decision by Federal Police

Figure 2. Special functions

Because the BAF are a federal service, there are a lot of regulations and legal procedures to keep in mind. The officer selection system in the CRS is regulated by the basic document "Regulation A42".

Now we will take a look at the different ways to become an officer.

Ways to become an officer

Mainly there are five ways to become an officer in the BAF (see Fig 3 and 4). (1) Via the PDRMA (the Preparatory Division of the Royal Military Academy). After the selection the candidates go to the RMA and either choose the "Polytechnics" or the "All Arms" Division. For specialised studies (e.g. medical school, merchant shipping) the candidates attend a civilian school, but are at the disposal of the military authorities. (2) Without following the PDRMA, the candidate may come directly to the CRS and he has, if selected, the

same career opportunities as the candidate who passed the PDRMA. (3) Via the selection procedure for auxiliary pilot, a candidate can be trained to become a jet pilot. These persons have limited career opportunities unless they succeed in the selection procedure later on. (4) Via the special procedure called "Officer Short term". Afterwards these candidates have the opportunity to become career officer. (5) On basis of academic qualifications (e.g. psychology, computer sciences) every year some specialists are recruited and selected. Here also, the possibility is given to become career officer after passing successfully the training.

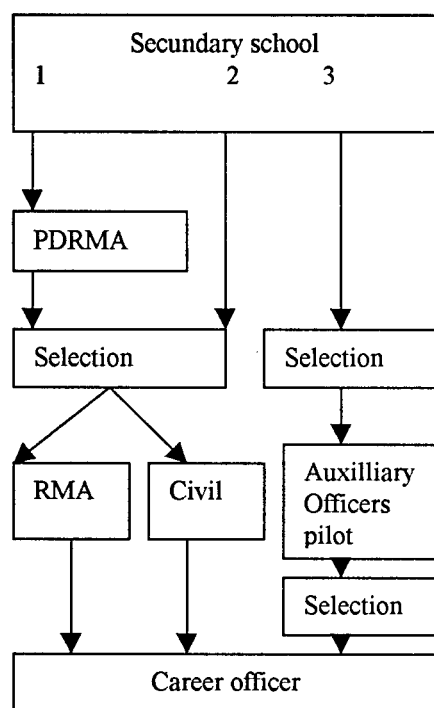


Figure 3. Ways to become an officer (1, 2, 3)

General purpose of the officer selection system

The general purpose of the BAF officer selection system is to define to what extent a candidate will be capable of –first of all- ending successfully a general training at the RMA and –secondly- a specific training at a Weapons School. In addition, the system aims at detecting to what extent a candidate will be capable of leading a group of people in difficult and dangerous circumstances. Practically, we compare the competencies of the candidate with the competencies shown in the officer selection profile.

What profile are we looking for? The crucial competencies of the officer profile are summarised in Fig 5.

Let us examine more closely the administrative, physical and medical parts of the selection procedures.

Non psychological selection

Some administrative requirements are to be fulfilled in relation to the officer application level. One can look at it as a pre selection or screening on topics, such as: degree of instruction, age, nationality, etc. To test the physical fitness the following procedures are used: an ergometric bicycle, a power test, a test of balance and a shuttle run. The medical examinations are the responsibility of the medical staff of the CRS. Finally there are a few traditional examinations organised by the RMA. These exams are the main factor for the final classification of the candidate.

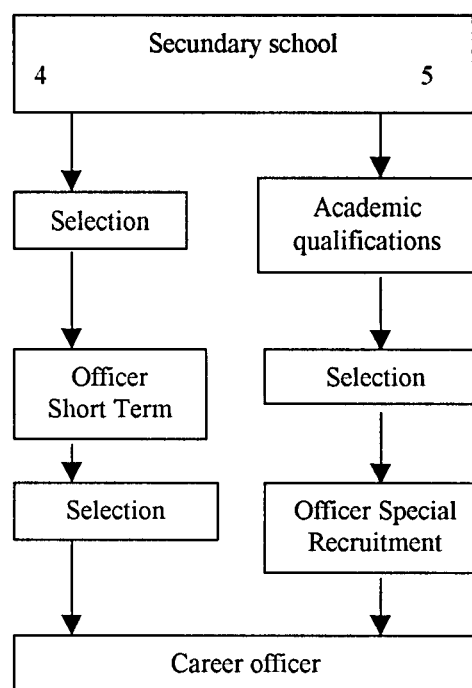


Figure 4. Ways to become an officer (4,5)

<i>Attitude</i>	<i>Potential</i>
Physical resistance	General look
Dynamism	Balance
Handiness	Discipline
Appearance	
<i>Leadership</i>	<i>Motivation</i>
Sociability	Intrinsic
Initiative	Instrumental
Authority	
Decisiveness	

Figure 5. Competency profile of an officer

The reader will find in the following sections an outline of the psychological procedures used for candidate-officers

Psychological selection

The main purpose of the psychological selection is to test the intellectual and personal characteristics of the candidates, to make a prediction about their future functioning as an officer and to reject the candidates who do not meet the minimal criteria.

The total selection procedure for a candidate-officer takes three days. The first day, the candidate performs the physical and medical tests; the second day he has to complete questionnaires, cognitive tests, personality tests and motivational inventories; finally, the third day, the candidate's behaviour is assessed in group situational tasks and a semi-structured interview closes this final day.

Van Beirendonck (1998) gives an overview of the selection tools for candidate-officers used by the CRS.

To decide whether a candidate is sufficiently competent, different scores are calculated: a score indicating the intellectual potential (PINP), an interview score, a score based on the group situational tasks and a final score, which is given by a Selection Board.

Let us now briefly review the tools implemented for psychological selection.

Cognitive assessment

Here, the BAF want to obtain an evaluation of the intellectual potential (PINP). Tests are being used, measuring verbal and abstract reasoning, spatial ability, a verbal factor, memory and flexibility in organising things. Some of the tests are paper and pencil-tests, other tests are of the computer assisted-type. The PINP score results out of a combination of test scores and different coefficients are used in the calculation.

Personality assessment

The candidates are asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their past experiences, called an Autobiographic Form. Recently a short form of the CPI (California Psychological Inventory) has been added to the set of personality measures. A Self-description and a Self Evaluation-rating scale are also taken. Motivational inventories include scales to evaluate the military educational system, the acceptance of the military way of living and the vocational values.

Very important in the assessment of the personality is the way a candidate performs group situational tasks. The applicants have to attain objectives in four group tasks. Groups are composed of 5 to 7 persons. The four tasks are the ROMAT (Role Modelling Area Task), a leaderless group discussion, a speech and the construction of an observation post. Visual representations of candidates performing each test are given in Fig. 6 (ROMAT), Fig. 7 (Discussion), Fig. 8 (Speech) and Fig. 9 (Construction).

For the ROMAT each applicant is responsible for the implantation of an installation following certain objectives and limitations. In the discussion the participants have to organise the relief of foreign



Figure 6. ROMAT

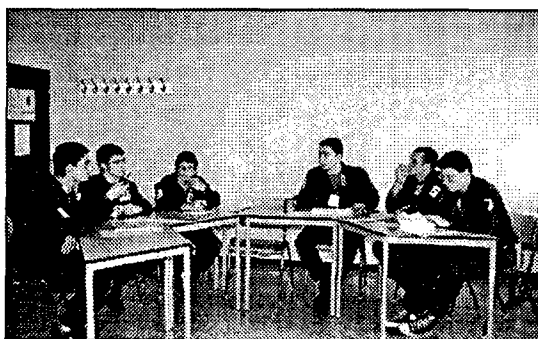


Figure 7. Discussion

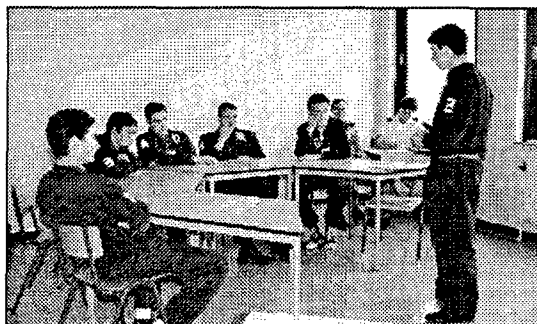


Figure 8. Speech

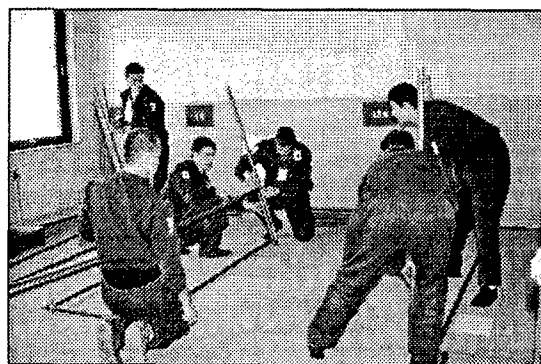


Figure 9. Construction

refugees. After preparing for their speech about an imposed topic, the candidates are asked to talk to the other participants and convey their message. Another kind of task is the realisation of a construction with metal tubes in order to build a frame of an imposed object.

The evaluation of the performance in these group tasks is the responsibility of a Selection Board, bringing together all the assessors.

Interview

The interview is structured following the criteria mentioned in the selection profile of the candidate officer (Fig 4).

The aim of the semi-structured interview is to test hypotheses about certain competencies of the candidate and to come to a synthetic view of the applicant's personality in relation to the function of future officer. A psychologist or an officer who got an appropriate psychological training conducts the interview. To get a certain standardisation and to ascertain a minimum level of objectivity there is a manual with definitions of acts and the corresponding interpretations and scores.

Generally spoken, the interviewer is one of the observers or assessors for the group tasks.

Psychological report and final decision

First of all scores are given by the interviewer, in relation to the different categories of the officer selection profile. A computer programme calculates next a final score.

In addition to this quantitative measure, the psychological report is completed with a description of the relevant characteristics of the applicant.

A commission, composed of the interviewer-assessors and supported by a psychologist, discusses each candidate and gives a final mark from 1 to 9. Applicants scoring lower than 4 are rejected.

Discussion

The BAF selects candidate officers using administrative, physical, medical and psychological techniques. Traditional examinations play the most important role. The CRS is responsible for the physical, medical and psychological selection and partly for the administrative selection.

This paper has focused on the responsibilities of the CRS and has thrown especially a light upon the psychological testing procedures.

The predictive value of the selection procedure for candidate officers could possibly be ameliorated if the BAF would emphasise more the psychological results and lower the impact of the traditional examinations! Alan Jones (1991) discussed possible contributions of psychologists to military officer selection.

To ameliorate the predictive power, accelerate and modernise the selection procedures, more computers,

computer specialists and psychologists are needed in view of better, more flexible and efficient armed forces!

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